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THE BOOK OF THE MONTH¹

BY F. M. COLBY

IN his earlier book on *Human Nature in Politics* Mr. Graham Wallas complained that the student of politics to-day spends his time in analyzing human institutions and neglects the analysis of man. He thereupon proceeded with great social-evolutionary zeal to analyze not only man, but the lower animals. He said he himself had entered politics by way of biology and psychology, passing thence directly into Parliament and the London County Council for laboratory work. His point of view was refreshing; much that he said was suggestive; and the signs are plentiful that the book has had a considerable influence on current political thought. But he became so enthusiastic as he went about botanizing and biologizing among the minds of politicians that he often lost himself in the contemplation of what seemed to me rather unfruitful analogies, as, for example, between business men and kittens or Royal Commissioners and earthworms. The bare fact that a politician reminded him of some prehistoric saurian was gratification enough, and he never wearied of pointing out the antiquity of our "instinctive nature."

The scarlet paint and wolf-skin head-dress of a warrior, or the dragon-mask of a medicine-man, appeal, like the smile of a modern candidate, to our instinctive nature.

And whenever he heard a member of Parliament laugh he would console himself with the thought that that apparently meaningless muscular agitation

may have been evolved because an animal which suffered a slight spasm in the presence of the unexpected was more likely to be on its guard against its enemies, or it may have been the merely accidental result of some fact in our nervous organization which was otherwise useful.

¹ *The Great Society*. By Graham Wallas. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1914.

No small part of this earlier volume was devoted to proving that political opinions were for the most part formed irrationally. Now it does not require any profound study of biological, of psychological text-books to convince us that that is true. A moderate degree of self-analysis or of penetration into the minds of our impassioned political opponents in a debate will suffice. Almost every one who stops to think will realize that a human being does not, as a rule, in an intellectual sense form his own political opinion. His political opinion is formed upon him—comes out on him like a wart. Yet so earnestly did Mr. Wallas contend in *Human Nature in Politics* that we were creatures of habit and environment in this matter—that we were irrational, instinctive, inert—that he almost convinced his readers that they had previously thought otherwise, for it seemed as if he could not be taking all that trouble to eradicate an opinion unless it really were somewhere in our heads.

It is not from reason, he pleaded earnestly, that we jump back from a falling object, or dodge a cab, or dream “we are walking along the Brighton Parade in a nightshirt,” or forget the cause of association of ideas and say “Simpson is a drunkard” merely because “some one told us that Simpson had a cousin who invented a cure for drunkenness.” And he piled instance on instance, ranging all the way from caterpillars to political oratory. Yet when we came to think of it there was very little that we should not have gladly admitted at the outset without argument. It was the author’s candor, lucidity, and novel method of approaching the subject that carried us along.

These same qualities will be found in *The Great Society*, along with more definiteness of aim and more substance. It is a plea for social psychology as the basis of social theory, for the application of science to the study of human nature in mass. By the “great society” he means simply the complex, urban, industrialized society of to-day wherein “cities and districts are only parts of highly organized national states” which in turn are involved in a general system of international relationships. Social psychology must discover and arrange

the knowledge which will enable us to forecast, and therefore to influence, the conduct of large numbers of human beings organized in societies.

It must not be deterred from this enormous task either by the “contempt of the experimentalist,” on the one hand,

or by those who fear any "intrusion of cause and effect into regions hitherto assigned to the free activity of human or superhuman will," on the other. As we read in the opening chapters of what social psychology must do, it seems as if it might be ready for application in about two thousand years. That, however, is not an objection. On the contrary, a job of this probable duration cannot be begun too soon. And, after all, to the Lord and Mr. H. G. Wells, and the eugenist, and the social evolutionist, a thousand years is as one day.

In the presence of mere stupid social inequality we feel comparatively hopeful. We can contrive schemes for dealing with the row of broken men waiting for the casual ward to open, or the dull, fat women who pass in their uselessly efficient motor-cars. But all our schemes involve an increase in the number of clerks and mechanics and teachers with no essential change in their way of life. . . .

Each generation, except in so far as we create by selective breeding a somewhat better, or by the sterility of the finer individuals a somewhat worse human type, will start, we are told in essentials, not where their fathers left off, but where their fathers began.

And we find ourselves sometimes doubting, not only as to the future happiness of individuals in the Great Society, but as to the permanence of the Great Society itself. Why should we expect a social organization to endure which has been formed in a moment of time by human beings whose bodies and minds are the result of age-long selection under far different conditions?

There is no longer the old faith in "manifest destiny," or "the tide of progress," or an unguided "evolution of social institutions." It is necessary to reconsider the basis of modern society as a whole if it is to be controlled, but such a consideration runs counter to the intellectual habits of the present generation who have been brought up as specialists.

Neither the sectional observations of the special student, nor the ever-accumulating records of the past, nor the narrow experience of the practical man can suffice us. We must let our minds play freely over all the conditions of life till we can either justify our civilization or change it.

Psychology has for many years been applying new methods to the examination of the human mind, but though many books on social subjects rest on assumptions essentially psychological, and though political discussion is constantly appealing to the "laws of human nature," the influence of the new psychological knowledge on sociological

and political writers has been surprisingly slight. The present volume, therefore,

is written with the practical purpose of bringing the knowledge which has been accumulated by psychologists into touch with the actual problems of present civilized life.

Then follows some excellent criticism of the social philosophers for their over-simplification of human nature—of the conservatives or “habit-philosophers” as represented by Sir Henry Maine, the “pain-pleasure” dogmatists as represented by Bentham, the followers of Hobbes with their doctrine of “fear,” the Comtists with their doctrine of “love,” and the “crowd-philosophers” of the present day.

He attacks the “mechanical assumption” of the crowd-psychologists that social actions are explained by imitation or sympathy or suggestion or any other single disposition or instinct. The late William James wrote in 1908, “I myself see things *à la Tarde*, perhaps too exclusively,” and in his *Principles of Psychology* he had previously declared that “man is essentially *the imitative animal*” and that “the whole history of civilization” depends on this trait. By the public at large the “laws” of Tarde and Le Bon have an authority like that of economic “laws” in the hey-day of the Manchester School. But, says Mr. Wallas, the leading psychologists during the last five or six years have denied the “very existence of such an instinct of imitation.” He concludes that

The whole subject-matter, indeed, of the “Psychology of the Crowd” requires restatement and re-examination. We must first get rid of the verbal ambiguities which are due merely to the employment of collective terms. Nothing is more annoying or useless than the constant implication in books and articles about “Crowds” and “Groups” that such a statement as “Crowds display a singularly inferior mentality” means anything different from the statement than that individual human beings when brought into close relations to numerous other individual human beings display such a mentality. . . . The inhabitants of a modern State, whether they are officials or journalists or working-men, are indeed ignorant of much which it would be well for them to know, and unmoved by much which it would be well for them to feel. That they are so is due not to the fact that “individually” they are thoughtful and temperate, and “collectively” blind and ferocious, but to the fact that they are human beings whose intellectual and emotional nature was evolved in contact with the restricted environment of the primitive world, and who have not yet learned, if ever they will learn, either to educate in each generation their faculties to fit their environment or to change their environment so as to fit their faculties.

In writing of peace and war he escapes the dogmatism and mental confusion that we usually find in such discussions, and what he says is of especial interest at the present crisis when we are all violently taking sides between the nations. It is a curious thing, this matter of national types, and it is probable that we should believe in them even if after the widest possible experience we found nothing like them among men. And what are their constituents? Hearsay, for the most part, a vague tradition, a habit of speech, a cartoon or two, the scoldings of some literary prophet, the report of an observer whose mind was previously made up. We would not hang a dog on the evidence on which we judge some eighty millions of people. And among persons with strong literary motives you never can tell what basis they have for their "types." Often a "type" is a mixture of a few personal acquaintances—perhaps only one man, a friend or an enemy—or somebody the writer has found in a book. The literary man and journalist are born multipliers, and it is easy for them to characterize a whole country because their imagination very quickly peoples it. In what Matthew Arnold wrote of England, how much there is of Matthew Arnold and how little of England. A man is to be pardoned if in his second thoughts on this subject he is somewhat skeptical.

Mr. Wallas, though not profound, appeals agreeably in these second thoughts. He reminds us that nations cannot be personified, that a nation does not "will" or "desire" an action by the same process that an individual does. When we say "Russia intends to make war on Austria," we are apt to think of a giant Russian making up his mind, or an enormous number of Russians bending to the purpose, when perhaps a dozen statesmen have decided on taking the aggressive.

If a general war should break out in Europe, the action of each nation in the proceedings leading to war would probably be due to the rather highly organized Wills of its politically important members, but the outbreak itself might (owing to the absence of a European Will-Organization) be undesired by any nation.

As to the present war, by the way, the book, though written long before, plainly foretells it, blaming the journalists and politicians who "contemplate with criminal levity" the danger of war "between the Triple Alliance and the Triple Entente."

He compares the biological argument that war is necessary for the improvement of the race with Lamb's Chinaman who burned his house down to roast his pig, but to the advantage of the latter, for the Chinaman did at least get the pig roasted, "whereas a thirty years' war between the Triple Alliance and the Triple Entente waged for the purpose of improving the European type would leave that type worse and not better." Shrapnel fired from a hill is an indiscriminating eugenic device. Nor is there any reason to believe that after a war the conquerors breed faster than the conquered.

A decisive victory in southeastern Europe of the Germans and Magyars over the Slavs would not mean that a hundred years hence there would be more Germans alive and fewer Slavs than if the war had not taken place. It only means that the Slavs would be less free and less self-respecting.

He thinks there is more force in the argument that permanent peace, though psychologically possible, is inconsistent with a good life because it would leave the warlike dispositions unstimulated. The man who never fights is, he says, "restless, unreliable, and probably unhappy," but it does not follow that war is the only "nervous tonic" for him. He urges the necessity of inventing some less costly one than the elaborate modern machinery of destruction. Hatred has a survival value, but hatred requires "for its full stimulation a vivid realization of its object." This is not easy to supply under conditions of modern warfare. He quotes a British officer in the Indian service: "I was right through the Afridi war, but I never saw a dead Afridi." He goes on to say:

As I now write, all good Europeans are watching the controversy about Serbia's window on the Adriatic, with the same feeling of helpless apprehension with which a man lying bound in a hay-barn might watch a child in the opposite corner playing with matches. If war takes place we shall certainly make some entity to hate, but for the moment the cry that "the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy shall not have Durazzo" leaves even the Music Halls cold and puzzled. We should get more satisfaction per thousand of violent deaths out of a war between Manchester and Liverpool.

F. M. COLBY.